

Warm Me Back Up

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Warm Me Back Up

by Anonymous

Summary

Soap likes to sleep around for a little stress relief, but it gets him into a sticky situation with a superior officer. It's not easy feeling whole again even once it's all over, but Ghost helps.

Notes

I'm an American with very little knowledge of the military so watch out

Soap was in trouble, and it was his own fault.

Being in the military didn't leave him with a lot of downtime in his life, and it was only whittling away the further he progressed in his career. He lived a stressful existence; they all did, and everyone needed a vice to cope with it. Liquor was fine – Soap wasn't kidding about liking his scotch – but it only took the edge off. A smoke didn't help him the way it helped Price. An agonizing, exhausting workout followed by a hot shower was better. But nothing compared to a good, long, thorough romp in the sack.

For years, that hadn't been a problem. Soap was a good looking man, and he knew how to use that to his advantage. A beautiful woman brightening a dingy motel room, soothing the lingering pounding of gunfire in his eardrums with her breathy moans, that made him feel human again. A big man pinning him to a damp alley wall behind a bar forced him to let go of his day, to stop worrying about whether he was sending new recruits into the field unprepared for its horrors. Scratches on his back from fingernails and bruises on his neck from teeth were pleasant aches that he could focus on while drifting to sleep instead of being kept awake by the throbbing pain of old bullet wounds.

It was a good, harmless vice, until it wasn't.

The edges between his personal and professional life had started to blur. He never slept with anyone he had authority over – the thought of it sent a chill down his spine – but anyone else was fair game in his books. If a fellow sergeant made eyes at him over the flimsy dividers in the gym showers, what good reason was there to resist? Sure, fraternization was frowned upon, but as long as things stayed professional outside of his bedroom no one had to be any the wiser. It added a thrill, knowing he'd see the person again, feeling their eyes burning into the back of his neck in the mess hall, right where they had scraped their incisors along his spine.

Soap never knew when to quit, though, and now he was in trouble. Now, he was in the bed of a superior. Now, he remembered why he never messed with anyone under his rank. It was dangerous to feel like you couldn't say no. More dangerous if you truly *couldn't* say no.

Lieutenant Harvey had ticked all of Soap's boxes the night they met. Soap had been a few drinks in at a shitty bar too close to base, an itch under his skin that he was hoping could get scratched. Harvey had

been tossing darts at a board that had seen better days, cigarette in hand, laughing with a mate, when he had caught Soap's eye. He was tall – at least Soap's height, if not an inch or two more – and *broad*. His ragged jeans had looked one wrong step from busting open along his thighs, his t-shirt not faring much better. He was almost as big as – well. Soap didn't follow that train of thought. He had just wanted that short beard to scrape his throat red, and he got it.

It didn't seem like a mistake at the time. Soap was bone-deep satisfied, floating on air the next morning. He never caught the guy's name the night before. It hadn't mattered. Soap had been thinking of someone else anyway. It was nothing but a pleasant memory, and it wasn't until Soap was formally introduced to Lieutenant Harvey the next week that he started getting nervous.

Harvey had spent that meeting with his gaze boring into the side of Soap's face. Soap had done his absolute best not to fidget under the stare, but to no avail – Ghost, sitting next to him, firmly pressed his knee to the bench when he couldn't stop bouncing it. Harvey noticed, of course, and Soap could see his lips curl into a smirk in his periphery.

Though Soap knew he fucked up, he was still fairly confident about the situation. Lieutenant Harvey would likely tease him, maybe seek him out again now that he knew where to find Soap, but he seemed like a good man with a good head on his shoulders. He would know not to push this, for both of their sakes. When the mission Soap and Ghost were pulled into was finished, they'd go their separate ways.

Unfortunately for Soap, that didn't turn out to be the case. And now, here he was, in deep, deep shit.

Lieutenant Harvey did not turn out to be a good man. They slept together once more, quick and dirty in a maintenance closet, and Soap thought it was just one more round to get it out of their systems. He laughed when Harvey squeezed the fingerprint bruises he left on Soap's hips before pulling his pants back up for him. "One for the road, eh?" he chuckled, throwing a cheeky grin over his shoulder. Harvey had met him with a raised eyebrow.

"You think you're getting rid of me like that, sergeant?" he murmured. "I think you should remember who you're speaking to."

Soap's blood ran cold. "With all due respect, sir," he started, but Harvey slapped a rough hand over his mouth before he could

continue.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Soap.” He left no room for argument. For a moment, he stayed there, watching Soap’s eyes carefully to see if he understood. When he was satisfied he removed his hand and stepped out of the closet. Soap couldn’t do anything more than stare into the closed door, still catching his breath, feeling far less settled after a good fuck than he ever had before.

Soap barely slept that night. His eyes were locked onto his ceiling as he laid motionless on his thin mattress, racking his brain to try and find a way out of this. There wasn’t one. Who could he tell? He had nothing waiting for him outside the military. He couldn’t let himself get discharged. Price would be so disappointed in him. He had pulled so many strings for Soap, had saved his life over and over. For all that to go to waste because Soap couldn’t keep it in his pants? He wouldn’t be able to meet his eyes if he found out. Gaz might understand, but he wasn’t a great liar, and Soap couldn’t burden him with something like this and not expect him to go to Price. Gaz would want to help, he would think it *would* help. In a perfect world, maybe it would, but Soap knew this would reflect just as badly on himself as it would on Lieutenant Harvey. Ghost was completely out of the question – Soap didn’t even want to imagine those blackened eyes staring down at him in disgust.

It would just have to remain a secret.

If Soap could forget why he was in the lieutenant’s quarters, he could almost convince himself this was a nice set up. He didn’t need to go haunt a dive bar to get his dick wet anymore, he could just go down the hall. Well, he wasn’t *allowed* to haunt the dive bars anymore, but he could pretend that wasn’t the case.

Things were just getting a little...intense.

If Soap had barely any free time before, now it was gone completely. As soon as Gaz dealt him into a hand of cards, he could almost guarantee he’d feel a warm palm between his shoulders and hear a quiet “Sergeant, a word in my office” in his ear. He’d stumble out onto the tarmac after a long mission, caked in mud and sweat and blood,

and find Harvey already waiting for him by the entrance. "I need your input after you're done debriefing, Sergeant," he'd say, in earshot of the rest of the team, and Soap would have to nod along. Even when running drills with Ghost he was haunted by another presence, Harvey always leaning against the wall and eyeing him up and down.

"You've got a shadow," Ghost had said once. "Harvey trying to recruit you from the 141?"

Soap had just laughed, hoping it didn't come off as nervous as he felt. "He hasn't said as much," he promised, and prayed silently that it would remain that way. Being completely under Lieutenant Harvey's thumb would wreck him. Ghost had stared at him from the corner of his eye for a beat too long, as if he was trying to read Soap's thoughts through his skull. Soap cleared his throat and barked a command to a gaggle of recruits lagging behind.

Behind closed doors things were harder. Things escalated until Soap thought they couldn't get any worse, and then escalated some more. What started as gentle pressure, a reminder of their ranks and situations to encourage Soap onto his knees, quickly became commands. Harvey's size had once been a turn-on, but was now a reminder that Soap couldn't fight his way out of this. On bad days, days when a mission had gone wrong, when Soap was tired and injured with an enemy's blood under his fingernails, sometimes Soap would bite back. All that earned him was a hand around his throat or a knee to the ribs to shut him up and put him back in his place.

Gaz saw the marks. A lot of people probably did, since they weren't possible to cover without pulling a hoodie around his head in the summer heat, but he was the only one to bring it up. He slung an arm around Soap's shoulders in the mess hall, turning to his ear as if whispering a sleazy joke he didn't think Price would appreciate from his seat across the table. "You good, man?" he whispered instead. "That looks painful."

Soap swallowed the bite he had been chewing. Whatever had been on his fork now tasted more like ash in his swollen throat. He wanted to tell Gaz the truth; maybe being discharged was a better fate than this after all. Instead, he smirked. "No worries, I left satisfied," he whispered back.

"Nasty!" Gaz laughed, smacking him on the back of his head. Soap grinned back and pretended he didn't see Price narrowing his eyes.

“Sergeant MacTavish.” Soap’s smile fell, and he turned from Gaz and Price to look behind him. Lieutenant Harvey glared down at him. “Finish up with your boyfriend here and meet me in my office.” Without waiting for a reply, he stomped away, knowing Soap would be on his heels soon like a beaten dog.

Gaz frowned. “What’s that about?” he asked, glancing between Soap and Price, as if he was out of the loop. Price was just wearing a matching frown, though. “I didn’t think you were still working on anything together.”

Price nodded and folded his arms over his chest. “Shouldn’t be. You and Ghost finished that mission weeks ago.”

Soap licked his teeth as he searched for a good answer. Excuses had been easy to come up with at first; all he needed to do was lie and say Lieutenant Harvey had questions about his paperwork. As time crawled on, though, that was becoming a less realistic situation. “I’m not sure,” he finally settled on.

“I won’t let him poach you,” Price warned. He looked serious. Soap was beyond grateful.

“I hope not,” he agreed with a smile, and got up to clear his tray.

That evening was rough. Soap’s ears were still ringing from all the shouting, Harvey laying into him for allowing another man to touch his property. “You’re *my* sergeant,” he had barked, and Soap had only made it worse by reminding him he didn’t report to Harvey. Soap’s head ached and his scalp burned where Harvey had pulled his hair until the fight was beaten out of Soap and then some. Soap had finally bowed his head and did as Harvey pleased, silently seething.

This had gone on long enough. He was a grown man; he was not someone’s plaything, Harvey’s authority be damned. Still, Soap didn’t want to give up his place in the military. He deserved his place here, he had earned it with his own blood, sweat, and tears, and he wasn’t about to abandon it just because some grunt decided Soap was an easy target. He needed a plan; he needed a way to get rid of Harvey without telling the truth. Soap didn’t know what that meant. A

transfer, maybe. He could leave the 141, as much as it pained him, and ask to move to a different base. Maybe Harvey wouldn't follow him. Maybe he'd decide he was too much work, and pick a different target.

A different target. The thought made Soap sick. *I'll just squeeze it off next time he wants a handy, Soap thought deliriously, then he won't be able to touch anyone.* It was unrealistic and impossible, and only served to rile Soap up even further. He reached up to grab his hair, flinching at the reminder of how tender it still was. He needed to let his anger out somehow, though, so he yanked the pillow off his bed and hurled it at the door, a guttural "fuck!" leaping from his chest.

"Whoa," Ghost said, hand still on the doorknob. The pillow bounced harmlessly off his arm. Soap stared, open mouthed.

"You ever hear of knocking?" he finally croaked out.

Ghost raised an unimpressed eyebrow, visible without the hardshell skull covering his mask. "You got something to hide?" His eyes followed the way Soap's chest flinched as he sucked in a breath. "Hm."

"No, Ghost," Soap hurried to reassure him. "Just, uh, personal business. Nothing to worry about."

"Personal business with Lieutenant Harvey?"

Soap's face flushed red. He was sure it didn't help his case.

"Lieutenant Harvey, sir?" he asked, playing dumb.

Ghost took a step into Soap's room and closed the door behind him. "You've been spending a lot of time together. He sure had a lot more questions about our mission for you than for me, didn't he?"

Soap swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I guess so."

"Strange, since I'm your superior."

"Aye."

"Soap," Ghost said. "Johnny. You have any trouble, you get me involved. If he's trying to pull rank on you to take on his dirty work, or join his team, or whatever, you send him to me." He paused when Soap didn't respond. "Or Price. You can go above my head if you don't want to talk to me."

“No, that’s not–” Soap stopped himself, forcing himself to think before replying. He didn’t want to give too much away. He didn’t want Ghost to know the disgusting dirty work he was really doing. “There’s just nothing to talk about.”

Ghost narrowed his eyes. “If you insist.”

“I do.”

“Fine.” Ghost heaved a sigh, offering more emotion than he usually displayed. Letting Soap know he was displeased with his answer. “We have a briefing in ten,” he said, finally letting Soap know why he was there in the first place.

“Got it. Thank you, Ghost.” Soap didn’t know how to communicate with just his eyes how grateful he was for Ghost’s offer even if he couldn’t accept it. He hoped Ghost got the message anyway.

“Harvey,” he heard Ghost greet as he stepped outside of Soap’s room. Soap leaned against the door and breathed a sigh of relief when both sets of footsteps disappeared down the hall.

“Your lieutenant was in your room.”

“Yes, sir.” Soap was kneeling in Harvey’s office, knees aching from the cold ground, back sore from the days-long mission he had only just returned from. Harvey had a firm grasp on the back of his neck, fingers tense like they always were when he was well and truly pissed.

The briefing had been about a new mission, and Soap had gotten whisked off base that same day. He had been hoping Harvey would have forgotten he had seen Ghost exiting Soap’s room by the time he returned, but he had been wrong. Again.

“What were you doing in there?”

“Just talking, sir.”

“Talking, hm?” Harvey took three steps to stand in front of Soap, fingers trailing from his neck until they could grasp his jaw. “And you couldn’t talk in public?”

Soap clenched and unclenched his jaw, feeling Harvey's fingers tighten at the motion. "It wasn't like that, sir. He was just letting me know about a briefing."

Harvey huffed out a breath, looking unimpressed. "And you had to close the door for that?"

"I swear, sir, that's all—"

Soap was interrupted by a fist to his jaw, slamming his face to the side. He gasped and stared wide-eyed at the floor he had been redirected towards, not daring to move. "I don't believe you, sergeant," Harvey taunted. "I think you're a *slut*. Do you really think he'll treat you any nicer? The *Ghost*?" He laughed, a bitter sound. Firm fingers grabbed Soap's jaw again, turning him and forcing him to make eye contact. "You're dumber than I thought."

Soap could feel his face burning at the accusation. "He wouldn't, Lieutenant Harvey, sir, he's not like that."

"Not like what? Like me? You saying I have bad taste, sergeant? Or I'm a bad man?"

"No, sir, no, I—" Soap shuddered. He didn't know what the right answer was. Harvey's eyes were frenzied, and Soap didn't know how to calm him down. "I'm all yours, sir," he tried, swallowing down the humiliation. "Ghost doesn't want me, he didn't touch me."

"You're lying!" The fist came flying at Soap's face again, but this time he was ready and jerked backwards in time. Maybe that was a bad decision, because suddenly Soap was flat on his back with Lieutenant Harvey pinning him down. "You think I'm blind, sergeant? You think I can't see the way he looks at you? The way your friend Gaz looks at you? Your captain? I know they're all having you behind my back. *Whore*."

Soap could feel his eyes stinging, embarrassingly enough. "That's not true."

Harvey's face twisted into a sneer. "I'll just have to show them who you belong to, then. Remind you to listen to my orders."

Soap squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth, knowing what was coming. Another blow to his face had his head spinning. Harvey hauled him up, only to slam a boot into the side of his ribs once, twice, and knock him back down. Soap felt something crack. It wasn't

enough – Harvey was shouting, again, covering the sounds of Soap’s coughs.

For a minute, Soap just took it. Maybe he deserved this; if he was a better soldier, maybe he wouldn’t be in this situation. If he was a better soldier, he wouldn’t have needed a vice in the first place, wouldn’t have gotten himself into this mess.

But he was a good soldier. He knew it. Price had hand picked him. He had proved himself in the field over and over. His team respected him. He had *earned* their respect. He was not somebody’s plaything, *authority be damned*. The next time Harvey aimed a kick at his gut, Soap swiped at his ankle and took him down to the floor.

Soap was bruised, tired, humiliated, but the adrenaline pumping through him made him forget his body. “You’re an insane bastard,” he grunted as he grappled with Harvey.

Harvey knew he had the advantage of bulk on his side, and he was using it to the best of his ability. Soap was scrappy, but he was running on fumes, and he knew he didn’t have a good chance of winning a real fight against his opponent. Harvey had already proved that in the past. Soap took a breath and spit in Harvey’s face, hoping it would be enough to surprise him. He smirked when it landed square in Harvey’s eye.

“Ugh!” Harvey lifted a hand to wipe at his face, and that was all the distraction Soap needed to twist out from under him. He had a hand on the doorknob before Harvey could grab him again, and Soap slammed his way out into the hallway, thanking his lucky stars when he didn’t see anyone in the immediate vicinity. He tried to book it down the hall, but Harvey launched himself out the door before Soap could get his legs moving. The back of Soap’s head crashed into the wall with a sickening *crack*, leaving him dizzy once again. Harvey took the opportunity to grab both of Soap’s wrists and pin them above his head.

“You’re being a very bad boy, MacTavish,” Harvey growled. He pressed in close, nose almost touching Soap’s. Soap’s gut twisted at the familiar scent of cigarette smoke on his breath. “I thought you learned your place by now.”

Soap spat again, but this time Harvey wasn’t phased. Soap could see the blood in his saliva. His cheek was throbbing. “I do know my place, and it has nothing to do with you.”

“Wrong answer, sergeant!” Harvey reared back just enough to slam Soap into the wall again. Soap’s ears were ringing. Harvey opened his mouth to say something else, but shut it when footsteps echoed down the hall. He dropped Soap’s wrists just as Price rounded the corner, Ghost trailing behind him with a stack of papers in hand. Soap kept his eyes on Harvey and wiped at the blood trying to dry on the corner of his mouth.

Price didn’t falter as he approached the pair, but Ghost’s steps stuttered when he caught sight of them. “What’s going on here?” Price asked. Soap still didn’t turn to look at him, but he heard the hard edge of suspicion to his voice.

Harvey pulled on a phony smile. “Just trying to convince Sergeant MacTavish here to go to medical. He’s feeling a bit stubborn today.”

“You didn’t report any injuries, Soap.”

“No, sir,” Soap confirmed.

“It’s not like you to hide that.”

Soap finally turned to look at Price. Ghost was lurking behind him, terrifying as ever, gaze impossible to interpret. Soap felt pinned. “No, sir,” he agreed. “Sorry, sir. I overlooked them.”

“I see.” Price’s eyes slid off of Soap and over to Lieutenant Harvey. “That better not happen again,” he said, though it didn’t seem directed at Soap. His eyes narrowed, then returned to Soap’s face. To where Soap was sure a bruise was darkening. “Go get checked out.”

“Yes sir.” Soap attempted to shoulder past Harvey, but the man’s hand settled on his lower back to guide him past Price and Ghost towards medical. Soap wasn’t sure how to writhe away without drawing attention. Luckily, Price’s hand pressed into Harvey’s chest to stop him from moving forward.

“Lieutenant Harvey, you should return to work. Ghost will escort Soap and make sure he gets treatment.” Price glanced back at Ghost only long enough to see him nod, then returned his gaze to Harvey. “Don’t feel the need to involve yourself with my team.”

Harvey nodded. “Yes sir. Of course.” He dug his nails into Soap’s back before letting go. Soap tried to keep his stride confident as he continued down the hall, but he thought he might look a little more as if he was fleeing the scene. He could hear Ghost quietly follow behind

him.

Ghost was characteristically quiet as they checked into medical. Soap had hoped, even expected, him to leave as soon as he made sure Soap was through the doors, but he stayed lingering at the edge of the room to supervise. It seemed he was unaffected by the nurses casting wary glances at him as they treated Soap's wounds. Soap supposed he did cut an intimidating enough figure that no one would dare to question his presence.

Soap sat silently, letting the medical staff manipulate his body and scan him as they wished. It wasn't long before a sweet-faced brunette gave him the verdict. Soap thought her name might be Sarah – she had treated him in the past. She had gentle hands. Soap hadn't felt that in a while.

"You have a non-displaced fractured rib," she said, no nonsense. "We can get you narcotics, if you'd like."

Soap shook his head. "No, thank you."

Sarah nodded. "You'll want to take some kind of pain relief for at least a few days. Stay on top of it. Make sure to regularly take deep breaths, even if it hurts." She waited for Soap to nod along before continuing. "Your jaw is fine, but there's a laceration inside your cheek. Just take it easy."

Soap nodded again. "How long before I'm field ready?"

Sarah frowned at him. "You boys, always eager to get hurt again. The ribs need four to eight weeks. Take it *easy*, Sergeant MacTavish."

Soap sighed, and winced when it hurt to do so. "You never give me good news, Sarah."

"You never give me good news either, John." She gave a light pat to his upper arm. "Go take an ibuprofen and rest up, now."

"Thank you." Soap gave her his most charming smile and made his way to the door. Ghost followed him like a shadow all the way back to Soap's room.

"Can I come in?" he asked, voice low and quiet once they reached Soap's door.

Soap turned to smirk at him while fishing out his keys. "Oh, so now

you're asking permission?"

Ghost only grunted. Apparently the dig was permission enough, because he followed Soap through the door once he twisted open the lock.

"You've done your due diligence and got me through medical," Soap said, fishing through his belongings for his trusty bottle of ibuprofen. "What else can I do for you?" His hands were shaking, he realized, but not before the bottle slipped between his fingers and rolled onto the floor. He sighed and gripped his ribcage, bracing himself to bend over.

Ghost beat him to it. He was already scooping the bottle off the ground before Soap turned around for it. His gloved hands twisted the cap off, shook out two pills, and handed them to Soap. Soap squeezed his hands into fists, willing them to stop shaking, before extending one to take the pills. He saw Ghost's eyes tracking his trembling fingers anyway.

"Just wanted to go over some discrepancies from your report, Johnny." Ghost gestured towards the stack of papers he had set onto Soap's desk. "You were sniping today. Normally you would have let me know if hostiles found your position. But you didn't. It's not in your report, either."

Soap felt heat crawling up his neck. He folded his arms protectively over his chest, ignoring the tug on his ribs. "That's right."

Ghost narrowed his eyes. "So what is it then, Johnny? Your position was compromised and you directly engaged with hostiles, and you neglected to tell anyone about it? I don't think that's the case."

Soap's mind was racing. He could lie. It would certainly be a bad look, lying to your superiors and omitting important mission details from a report, but maybe not a bad enough offense to get discharged. He could say the hit to his jaw scrambled his brains, made him forget until now.

"Don't lie, Johnny," Ghost warned as if reading his thoughts. He stepped forward into Soap's space. His voice softened. "Don't lie to me."

"Ghost, I—" Soap inhaled sharply. He couldn't meet Ghost's eyes anymore. Not when he was so close, when he imagined this was as close to begging as Ghost ever got. "Don't make me tell you."

“Why not?”

“I’ve worked so hard to get here, sir,” Soap whispered, “I don’t know what to do.”

Ghost paused before answering. Soap watched his chest rise and fall, breaths coming faster than usual, the way they did when he was angry. Soap had made him angry.

“Johnny. Look at me.”

Soap squeezed his eyes shut and grit his teeth. “Ghost—”

“Look me in the eyes,” Ghost all but pleaded. Soap reluctantly met his gaze. “I’m asking as a friend, Johnny. Not as your lieutenant. I won’t tell Price anything you tell me here. I just want to help you.”

Soap looked into his eyes just like Ghost requested, darting between them, trying to find any trace of insincerity. When he didn’t find any, he let out a slow breath and nodded. Ghost’s shoulders visibly lost tension.

“I did something really stupid,” Soap admitted quietly.

“That’s not new.”

Soap couldn’t help but crack a smile. “No, that’s not new. But…” He ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the already askew mohawk. “This is worse. This could end my career. I didn’t mean to, I swear, but it’s bad.”

Ghost didn’t flinch. “Okay.”

“I slept with Lieutenant Harvey,” Soap blurted out, eyes returning to the relative safety of Ghost’s chest. “I didn’t know, at first, I swear – I wasn’t trying to sleep my way up the ladder or anything—”

“Of course not, Johnny.” Ghost hesitated before settling a hand on Soap’s shoulder. Gentle. “You wouldn’t. You don’t need to.”

Soap inhaled. “Yeah. I don’t. And I wouldn’t have at all – it’s such a stupid move – I didn’t even know he was military! I never would have—” He dragged a hand down his face. “I didn’t know until we met in that briefing. All of us.”

“I see.”

"I hoped we could both just pretend it never happened, but, well, you know. You get it." Soap licked his dry lips before continuing. He tasted blood. "He pulled rank and here we are."

When Ghost didn't reply right away, Soap chanced a glance back up at his face. He looked away just as quickly – Ghost was *furios* .

"Sorry," Soap said.

"Don't *apologize*," Ghost snarled. Soap flinched. Ghost's hand stayed on Soap's shoulder, not squeezing or pulling him anywhere. Still gentle. "This whole time, he's been fucking you?"

"Aye."

"And hurting you?"

Soap scuffed the toe of his boot on the ground. "Well, not this bad, but–"

"*Not this bad*," Ghost repeated, disbelieving. "Johnny, do you hear yourself? Why didn't you say anything?"

"What was I supposed to do, Ghost?" Soap met his eyes again, scowling. "Tell my superiors I whored myself out so much I was liable to get kicked out? Harvey could get me discharged in a heartbeat! He could be telling Price I came onto him right now, that he was only defending himself from a f–"

"*Don't*, Johnny," Ghost interrupted. "Don't talk about yourself like that. I'll go to bat for you. Price won't believe that bastard, but even if he does, *I'm* your direct superior. You're not going anywhere."

Soap could only gape up at him.

"Okay?"

"I – Okay."

"Good." Ghost finally squeezed his shoulder, but it was a friendly gesture, not a possessive one. "Do you want to, uh, maybe you should get a rape kit done."

Soap barked out an astonished laugh. "What? No. I'm not a fucking *victim*."

"You were coerced by a superior officer into sexual–"

"I was the one who came onto him."

"Maybe the first time." Ghost's gaze drilled into Soap. "Everything that followed isn't your fault. Or your responsibility. That's not how it works."

"I know that's not how it... Ugh." Soap rolled his eyes and crossed his arms tighter, trying to physically hold himself together. His stomach turned. "I'm still not doing that. We didn't do anything today, anyway."

Ghost nodded. "Okay. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Just an option." He hesitated once more before continuing. "You should see a psych, though."

"I don't need a shrink, Ghost. I've been fine on the field this whole time."

"You don't *need* anything, Johnny. But it'll help." He squeezed Soap's shoulder again before dropping his hand back to his side. "I want you to be okay, on and off the field. As your friend."

Soap huffed. "That's playing dirty."

"I'm not above that." Soap couldn't be sure with the full mask in the way, but he was pretty sure Ghost cracked a little smile. He sobered quickly, though. "I was telling the truth earlier, about keeping this between us. But I want to discuss this with Price. He has more sway, and he knows how to play politics better than I do to get that bastard out of here. If you'll let me."

Soap ran his tongue along the cut inside his mouth as he turned the idea over in his mind. He liked Price. He trusted him with his life. This, though... The fear of Price's disappointed gaze terrified him. He wanted to believe Ghost, that Price would understand, but...

Soap glanced at the digital clock by his bedside. The number there reminded him of his bone-deep exhaustion. "Don't tell him," Soap finally murmured. Ghost clenched his jaw, displeased. "I should. I will. He'll have the same questions you did. Just not tonight."

"Okay," Ghost said, relaxing again. "Good. Get some sleep."

Soap smiled. "Yes, sir."

"And lock your door behind me."

“Ghost—”

“I’m serious, Soap.” Ghost fixed him with a look as he made his way to exit. “Don’t open this door for anyone but me. I don’t want that fucker poking your bruises.” He waited for Soap to roll his eyes and nod. “I’ll report your injuries to Price tonight, but I won’t tell him anything else. Okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Ghost.” Soap picked at the skin around his thumbnail. His hands weren’t shaking anymore. “Sorry for keeping this secret.”

“Don’t apologize, Johnny. Thank you for trusting me now.” Ghost nodded at him and closed the door behind himself, but he didn’t walk away until he heard the lock click into place.

Soap woke to dull knocking, like someone was using their foot. He made for the door before remembering Ghost’s warning the night before. Not wanting to get his head chewed off first thing in the morning, he waited to see if his visitor would announce themselves.

“It’s me,” Ghost called. Soap let out an exhale he didn’t realize he was holding and unlocked the door.

Ghost had two trays balanced in his hands.

“Brought breakfast,” Ghost grumbled. His voice was low and sticking, like he hadn’t used it yet this morning. “You should stay in bed.”

Soap scoffed. “It’s one broken rib, Ghost, I’ve had worse.”

“Don’t care.” Ghost kicked the door closed behind him and set the trays down, one on the desk and one on Soap’s lap. Soap’s already had two little pills on it next to a cup of coffee. Soap wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, embarrassing as it may be, so he did his best to enjoy the impromptu breakfast in bed. He distracted himself by watching Ghost chew; he was wearing just the knit balaclava today, and lifted above his nose to eat, Soap could almost make out his entire face. His strong jaw was hypnotic to Soap as they worked through their bland breakfasts. Tracing the old scars as they moved was

soothing. Ghost didn't seem too bothered by his staring, or at least not enough to call him on it.

When they finished, Ghost took Soap's tray from him and stacked it with his own. "Price was..." He paused, searching. "...agitated. When I didn't tell him what happened."

Soap groaned. "Aye, that figures. I'll go find him."

"Let me walk with you."

"You a guard dog?"

"Yes."

Ghost hadn't pulled his mask down yet. Soap could see the tense line of his mouth. He sighed. "Alright, alright. Do what you want." Soap groaned as he moved to finally get out of bed, ribcage protesting. Ghost's hand shot out to help him. He wasn't wearing his gloves. Soap allowed himself to grab it for support, trying not to think too much about the feel of their calluses meeting, or the surprising warmth of Ghost's palm. He cleared his throat and fought down his blush. "Just let me get changed."

Ghost didn't move to leave. Soap raised an eyebrow.

"You gonna watch me strip?"

This time it was Ghost who cleared his throat. "I've seen you in the gym showers a hundred times, MacTavish. I want to look at that rib."

"It's just as fucked as it was yesterday, promise."

"Show me anyway."

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, Soap lifted the old ratty shirt he wore to bed over his head. He didn't look down at the bruising, but judging by Ghost's scowl, it wasn't pretty.

"Didn't see those ones yesterday."

"What ones?" Soap dropped his gaze to his own torso. For a moment, he didn't know what Ghost was looking at – then he saw the bruises low on his hips, where his sweatpants had sagged down. Soap had almost forgotten they shouldn't be there. He'd had Harvey's fingerprints in his skin there since this started. "Oh."

Ghost tugged his mask back down to cover his face. "I'll shoot him in the leg and make it look like an accident."

"Stand down, doggy," Soap teased. He couldn't help the pleased flush that crawled up his neck though, exposed for Ghost to see. Soap quickly turned around and hoped it was less visible on the back of his neck. He focused as hard as he could on getting into his clothes, and Ghost mercifully didn't say anything else.

The walk to Price's office was dead silent. Soap could feel his nerves climbing up his throat, threatening to strangle him. If Price didn't react well, Soap was done for. Even if he believed Soap's story, he might still think of Soap as a disgusting slut, someone not fit for the 141. Someone with a history of fraternization, ethical dilemmas aside, was a liability. This could be the end of his career, certainly the end of his career progression.

He must have been staring at the solid wood of Price's office door too long, because suddenly there was a hand on his shoulder again. Soap flinched and whipped his head around. Ghost looked startled too, and made to move his hand.

"Sorry," Soap apologized, "I thought – It's fine."

He watched Ghost's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. His hand settled back onto Soap's shoulder. Steady. Grounding. "I didn't mean to startle you," he apologized back. "Just wanted to ask if you were okay."

Soap nodded. "I am. Just swallowing my pride." When Ghost didn't look convinced, Soap shrugged. "Don't want to get discharged, Ghost."

"You won't be. I won't let him."

"All due respect, I don't think you have that authority, sir."

Ghost narrowed his eyes. "Don't care. I won't let him." Soap couldn't do anything but crack a sad smile. "Let me come in with you. I won't say anything."

Soap nodded. "Okay. Thank you." He raised his fist to knock, but the door squealed open before Soap could make contact.

Price raised an eyebrow at them. "You boys going to keep shooting the shit out here, or are you coming in?"

Soap straightened his spine, heat rushing to his cheeks. "Yes sir, sorry sir." Ghost was less polite, just grunting and leading the three of them back into the office.

Price had a couch in his office. It was an old brown leather thing, worn at the edges, but warm and inviting. Price gestured his two guests towards it and dragged his own chair out from behind his desk. When they were settled, Price leaned back and looked Soap up and down. "I hear you're out for two months."

Soap grimaced. "One to two, sir." He choked down the thought of it not mattering either way if he were dismissed today. Ghost bumped his knee with his own as a small comfort, pretending he was just getting more comfortable. "Just a fractured rib."

"Glad to hear it, son. Could have been worse." An eyebrow climbed back up. "Especially if hostiles got such a big jump on you that you couldn't radio in to let us know about it."

Soap groaned and dropped his head into one of his hands. The other gripped the leather of the couch for dear life. "That's not what happened, sir."

"I know."

"I know you do." Soap took a deep, steadying breath, and clenched his fist tighter into the couch. His hands were trembling again. As soon as he noticed, he crossed his arms and buried them in his armpits. "I'm sure you figured it out. I've been fraternizing with Lieutenant Harvey."

"*Fraternizing*," Ghost spit. Soap shot him a glare.

Price shifted, but Soap couldn't meet his eyes. Couldn't see that disappointed face. "And this *fraternizing*," Price said, "is what messed up your face? Fraternizing broke a bone?"

"Well, uh." Soap's knee started bouncing, agitated. "I tried to, uh. Wanted to stop said fraternizing."

"I see."

"He didn't like that much, I guess. So." Soap shrugged.

"And up until yesterday, you were a willing participant in this?"

Soap could see Ghost tense up beside him, as if he were gearing up to do something stupid to his own captain. Soap piped up before he could make a move. "I was—" The words caught in his throat. He cleared it and tried again. "He pulled rank, sir, and I didn't..." His lips were dry. He swore he could still taste blood. "I didn't want to get discharged, sir," he finished weakly.

Price shifted again. Soap steeled himself and raised his face, ready to meet Price's disappointment. Instead, all he found was distress.

"John," Price rasped, "When did this start?"

"When you had Ghost and I join his team for a mission, sir."

"And he's been hurting you this whole time?"

"Not like *this*, I haven't been going on the field injured, sir."

Price gripped the arm of his office chair. "That's... I'm happy about that, son, but that's not what I'm worried about." He took a breath – Soap could almost hear him counting, *in for four, out for eight*. "No use scolding you now, but you should have said something."

Soap's leg bounced faster. "I know, sir, but it was my fault."

Price's frown deepened. "How."

"If I wasn't such a—" Soap cut himself off. Price didn't need to hear that. "I pushed it the first time. I didn't know who he was, it was at a pub, but I started it. And I could've guessed he was military."

"So?"

Soap blinked. "So? So if I hadn't done that, he wouldn't have done anything on base."

"You're a smart man, Soap. Do you really think that's the only situation where a man like that abuses his power?"

"I mean... I don't know, I made it pretty easy for him."

"Soap."

Soap sighed. "I know. He'd just pick another target – that's why I didn't transfer."

Ghost startled. "You were going to transfer?"

“Thought about it,” Soap said, “Didn’t think he’d care enough to follow to a different base, but I don’t want him bothering the privates or anything, though.”

“So what was your plan?” Price growled. “Just keep getting—”

“Don’t say it, sir, please.”

“That’s what it is, Soap. *Was*,” he corrected.

“Doesn’t mean I want to hear it,” Soap said, a bit petulantly.

Price sighed. “I wish you had told us earlier, Soap. This is serious stuff. Grounds for dismissal, if I have anything to say about it.”

Soap flinched, hard. He knew it was coming, but it didn’t make it any easier. He bit down on the cut inside his cheek, anything to ground himself further.

A hand pressed down on his still-bouncing knee, stilling it. “Not you, Johnny,” Ghost growled.

“No! Not you,” Price confirmed. “Why would this come down on you?”

Soap’s throat felt dry. “Because... What if I was trying to sleep my way up the ranks?”

It wasn’t often that Soap saw Price this thoroughly surprised. “You weren’t. Nobody would believe that.” Price sighed and sunk deeper in his chair. “Soap, I don’t need to tell you your own reputation. You can’t climb up the ranks any faster than you already are.”

“I mean, I know that, but—”

“And you think I don’t?”

Soap tongued his freshly irritated wound before replying. “Point,” he finally admitted.

“Good. I’ll take care of Lieutenant Harvey,” Price promised, spitting the name out like a curse. “Don’t let him get you alone again until then. Rest that rib.” He leaned forward and patted Soap on the knee. “I don’t want to see you overexerting yourself, I want you back in a month.”

Soap beamed.

The weeks crawled by. Soap was many things, but *patient* wasn't a word anyone would use to describe him. He was crawling out of his skin. He couldn't exercise, not really, not the way he wanted to run himself ragged. His favorite vice was out of the question – he didn't know if the idea of casual sex was going to appeal to him again anytime this decade. There were only so many hot showers a man could take to try and melt the tension in his shoulders. All that was left was a handle of scotch.

Lieutenant Harvey was off base – forced on leave while under investigation. Price was being pretty quiet about the whole thing. Soap had tried to pry details out of Ghost, but he had sworn up and down that he didn't know any more than Soap did. As long as he was gone, Soap supposed, that was fine for now.

Gaz knew now, too. The broken rib thing was a hard one to explain away, after all. He had been a godsend for Soap. He didn't treat Soap with kid gloves. He was pissed about what had happened, of course, and pissed that Soap had let it go on so long, but nothing changed. He camped out in Soap's room while he rested his injury with a bottle of liquor and a deck of cards, but that happened anytime either of them was hurt.

Price wasn't too bad either. He was getting on Soap's nerves a little, what with the radio silence on matters of Harvey and frequent check-ins to make sure he hadn't tried to contact Soap, but Soap could forgive him for that.

Ghost was another matter.

He had been Soap's shadow since they left Price's office. It had been nice the first few days, when Harvey was still lurking around and trying to corner Soap. He was better than any guard dog, and certainly a more threatening presence than one. Once Harvey was gone, though, it became grating.

Soap was running drills as per usual. He could still do some work, for God's sake, no matter how disapproving Ghost's stare was. This was beyond routine. There was zero reason for Ghost to be lingering. And yet he was still there, ever-present, making sure Soap didn't – what?

Trip on a pebble? Get whined at too hard by the rookies?

Soap was young, and he had a reputation for being approachable. He liked that reputation. He wanted new recruits to have a comfortable authority figure. It was also a bit of an open secret that Soap slept around, so a little flirting wasn't uncommon. It was funny, Soap thought. The recruits were never serious about it. He couldn't fault them for shooting their shot.

Ghost could, apparently. A young guy – pale, freckled, cheeks burned from having not yet learned how frequently he needed to apply sunscreen – wolf whistled when Soap bent over to grab his clipboard. Soap turned to lightheartedly scold him, grin already on his face, but Ghost stomping onto the field took the words out of his mouth.

"You forget that's your sergeant?" Ghost barked. The pale young guy was even paler, now. "That how you show respect to your superiors?"

"N-no sir, sorry sir!"

Soap jogged over while Ghost continued laying into the poor recruit. "I didn't fucking think so. You need to–"

"Woah, woah, hey," Soap interrupted. He grabbed Ghost's bicep and pulled him back a step. He expected to get shrugged off, but Ghost allowed it. Taking that as a good sign, Soap tried to bring a little levity to the situation. "I don't need you defending my honor, LT, don't have much left anyway." The look Ghost shot Soap was enough to make a lesser man's knees shake. Soap wasn't a lesser man. He turned towards the recruits. "Alright, let's end it here for today. Good work, boys."

Soap and Ghost watched in silence as the recruits shuffled away, exchanging looks amongst themselves. Soap heaved a sigh once the last of the bunch was far enough away not to hear it. The deep breath didn't make his ribs ache anymore.

"I don't need you babying me," he said firmly.

Ghost bristled. "'M not 'babying' you. Kids need to learn some damn respect."

"They do respect me," Soap assured him, crossing his arms. "They just *like* me. They're joking. They know where the line is."

"You have honor left."

“Aye, Ghost, I do.” Soap couldn’t stop himself from scowling. “I learned from my mistakes, okay? I’m not some dumb slut, it won’t happen again. You can stop stalking me over it.”

Ghost matched his scowl. “It’s not *slutty* to be in an abusive relationship, Johnny. I thought you were seeing a shrink to tell you that shit.”

Soap threw his hands in the air, exasperated. “I know, Ghost! I am. Just like you told me to. I’m taking care of myself. You know that.”

Ghost didn’t look convinced.

“Look, it’s nice that you want to make sure I’m doing well. You’re a good lieutenant. I don’t need you breathing down my neck, though. Harvey isn’t here. Medical says I’ll be cleared for action next week. Everything is fine.”

Finally, Ghost stood down. His gaze softened, barely – Soap wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t watching for it. “I’m not doing this as your lieutenant.”

“I know, Ghost.” Soap rolled his eyes and patted Ghost on the chest. “As my friend. And as your friend, I’m telling you to back off and stop worrying.” Ghost grunted in confirmation, and Soap gave him one more pat before striding off after his recruits.

Price was more than happy to have Soap back in action, and Soap could barely contain himself. He had more energy built up than he knew what to do with; even Gaz had been getting sick of his restlessness. It felt good to be back out there, to run himself ragged, to flirt with his lieutenant over the comms, to feel productive again.

Soon enough, though, Soap was back to square one. He was once again endlessly busy, endlessly stressed, and still down a vice. He could go back to a bar, maybe further away from base to reduce risk, maybe staying far away from men who could scratch that dangerous itch he just couldn’t shake off, but the idea of letting a stranger touch him again was nauseating. Besides, he didn’t want to share a bed with anyone right now. His therapist was the only one who knew, but Soap

had been waking up in cold sweats with the smell of cigarette breath lingering in his nose.

He had always been a gym rat, but now he practically lived there. If he wasn't eating, sleeping, or training recruits, it was almost guaranteed you could find Soap booking it around the track or pinned under a rack of weights. Just about the whole base was sick of being asked to spar. Soap told himself he was just trying to bulk back up after his month off, but the excuse was flimsier every day.

Ghost found him there on a rainy day pounding his feet against a treadmill. Soap lifted the hem of his shirt to mop sweat off his brow, and Ghost's eyes fell to where fingerprint bruises used to linger. Soap flushed and dropped his shirt back down.

"Need something, LT?"

"You're going to wear a hole in that thing," Ghost said, nodding at the treadmill Soap was so thoroughly abusing. The poor thing had already seen better days, and Soap definitely wasn't helping it lately.

Soap laughed and turned the pace down a few notches to start cooling down. "She's a hearty lass."

"Hm." Ghost continued to watch as Soap's pace fell. His burning gaze drilled into Soap, making him feel unsteady on his feet. When he was down to a walk, hands on his hips as he caught his breath, Ghost spoke again. "Wanna spar?"

"Obviously," Soap said, grinning. Ghost's eyes crinkled as if he was smiling back.

Soap loved getting Ghost on a mat. Soap didn't want to brag – too much, anyway – but he was one of the better fighters on base. It barely mattered against Ghost. Despite his size he was *fast*, unpredictable, and made throwing Soap down look easy. It made the thrill of Soap's rare victory all the sweeter when he had Ghost pinned between his thighs.

The view didn't hurt either, regardless of outcome. Soap pretended not to notice his own feelings on that, though.

Ghost seemed to enjoy it just as much. He always had something to teach Soap, one more trick up his sleeve to prepare him for. Soap could get high off the approving hum Ghost rumbled out whenever Soap got something right. There were others milling about the gym,

but Soap's world was entirely narrowed on Ghost.

Soap got close a couple times, but wasn't able to pin Ghost that afternoon. "Again," he asked, over and over, and Ghost humored him. They grappled until Soap was finally worn out, finally was as close to he'd get to feeling human. Ghost pinned him to the mat once more, Soap laid out flat on his back, and paused, assessing, likely to offer one last piece of advice on his form or technique. He met Soap's eyes, and all Soap could do was grin dopily.

"Good fight, LT," Soap said, voice low and hoarse. He watched as Ghost's pupils dilated.

"You almost had me," Ghost replied, a beat too late.

You've always had me, Soap wanted to say. That was more honest than he could even be with himself, though, so Soap stayed quiet. Ghost's eyes stayed locked on his for another few seconds before trailing down Soap's face. To his mouth. To his throat, when Soap swallowed.

"Johnny," Ghost breathed.

Soap flexed his arms where Ghost still had them pinned to the mat. As if electrocuted, Ghost shot up and off of him.

"Sorry, I—" Ghost blinked. "Uh. Was wondering if your cheek was okay. From back then."

Soap let out a disbelieving laugh as he pried himself off the floor. "My cheek? That healed in like a week, Ghost."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure, since you kept biting it."

"You..." It was Soap's turn to blink dumbly. "Uh, you noticed that?"

Ghost shrugged. He took a quick scan around the area, seeming satisfied when no one was in earshot. "When I went through... what I went through," he murmured, "sometimes I'd aggravate wounds on purpose, after. It felt like it helped, but it didn't. I don't want to see that happen to you, too."

Soap rubbed the back of his neck. He needed a haircut. He didn't want anyone to touch his hair. "I hear you. I was just freaking out, then. I stopped. I don't."

"Good, Johnny."

Soap smiled weakly. He felt a little too exposed, out in public like this with Ghost peering into him, even if Ghost was baring himself too. "Thanks," he said, hoping it conveyed everything he needed it to.

A hot shower after such a good workout had Soap feeling boneless. Ghost was in the stall next to him, the one in the corner that was practically reserved for him. He turned away from Soap and everyone else, like usual, face hidden from view. Still, having him nearby was comforting. No one could crowd Soap into a wall here as long as Ghost was right beside him. He felt warm, safe, and drowsy, like he might actually sleep through the night for the first time in months.

"You'll get heatstroke if you stay in there any longer," Ghost eventually scolded. Soap turned and found the lieutenant out of the shower and back in a fresh balaclava and a sweatsuit to match. He looked cozy. It made Soap's chest warm.

"Maybe. Feels nice, though." Soap shot him a grin before turning off the water. Ghost tossed a towel at him. "Been a while since I felt nice." It was too honest. He wouldn't have said it if he still had his wits about him. He busied himself with changing into his own sweats to hide from his words. Ghost, mercifully, didn't comment.

"Johnny." Ghost's voice crackled into Soap's ear through his comms. The two were staking out a building that allegedly housed their target but every day was seeming more and more abandoned. Ghost was the one keeping watch for now, while Soap tried to catch some semblance of rest in their vehicle nearby. This stakeout wasn't meant to go on this long, but nothing ever went to plan. "What makes you feel good?"

Soap choked on his own saliva and had to sit up to stop coughing. "You trying to have phone sex on the job?"

"MacTavish," Ghost growled.

"Don't *MacTavish* me! That was a sexy little line!"

Soap could practically hear Ghost rolling his eyes. "Fuck off."

Soap left his mic on so Ghost could hear him snicker. When he

stopped laughing at Ghost's expense, he laid back down in the backseat of the truck and thought about it.

"Stuff that makes me feel warm," he settled on. "A long workout and a hot shower. Decent scotch. Good sleep."

"Hm. Boring."

"Hey, I'm a simple man. You got a more interesting vice?"

Ghost took a moment to respond. "I get tea shipped to base and hide it in my room. Don't blab."

"Ha! Fancy boy. Cute."

"Guess that's warm too, huh?"

Soap smiled. "Aye. Makes you feel human for a bit, right?"

"Yeah."

The two lapsed back into silence. Ghost kept his comms open, so Soap did the same. Ghost's steady breathing was soothing in his ear, and Soap found himself actually finding sleep.

It didn't last, though. It was still dark when Soap jolted awake, the phantom sensation of hands wrapped around his neck still lingering. It couldn't have been more than a couple hours since he dozed off. Soap gasped for air, like he couldn't get enough through his swollen throat.

"Johnny?" Ghost's voice crackled in his ear again. It took Soap a minute to realize their comms were still on. "How copy?"

Soap shuddered his way through another breath. "All good, Ghost." He massaged his throat absently. It wasn't sore. There weren't any bruises. "Just a dream."

"Get those a lot?"

"Every night," Soap admitted. He felt braver saying it with the distance between them, somehow.

Ghost must have felt the same, because he only hesitated a moment before admitting it as well. "I do too. Like I'm trapped in a grave, again. But this time, it's Price or Gaz or—" Soap could hear him choke on the words. "Or you. In there with me."

“That’s fucked up,” Soap said. He didn’t know what else there was to say.

“Yeah.”

“I dream about Harvey, but you guys don’t believe me. Think I’m gross and leave me to die somewhere out here. Or to die in his office.”

“That’s fucked up, too.”

Soap snorts. “Yeah.” He picks at the ragged hem of one of his pockets. “You should beat me up more often. I don’t have dreams after we spar.”

Ghost hums into the mic. “Now who’s trying to have phone sex?”

“Och, you sadist!” Soap laughs. “Knew you were a freak in the sheets.”

“You think about that a lot, Johnny?” If Soap closed his eyes, he could pretend the teasing tone was seduction.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, *Simon*.”

Ghost growled threateningly, but Soap only smiled.

Lieutenant Harvey felt further away every day, especially now that Ghost was spoiling Soap rotten. Soap was starting to feel a little like a woman getting wooed; he guessed women getting wooed didn’t get pinned to a mat as much as Soap had been, though.

The sleep comment must have stuck with Ghost. At least once a week, now, Ghost showed up to the gym while Soap was training to death and offered to spar. It always helped. Soap told himself it was the mental stimulation as he tried to figure out Ghost’s moves combined with the physical exertion of a good fight, but he suspected it had more to do with Ghost’s sweaty body being in such close proximity to his own. It was the closest he’d gotten to a good lay in months.

Ghost always followed him into the showers after, cleaned himself efficiently and waited as Soap just about drowned himself in steam. He seemed to know when Soap would be dizzy from the heat better

than Soap did and would coax him out with a fresh towel every time. It felt good. Soap felt cared for. Maybe that was just a sign of how desperate he was.

That's where Price found them one evening. Soap was just finishing rubbing his head down with a towel; the sides were freshly buzzed, but the mohawk was only getting longer. Soap just couldn't bring himself to let hands, his or otherwise, anywhere near it for longer than it took to wash and rinse.

"That's nowhere near regulation, son," Price said in lieu of a greeting. Soap grimaced. "More importantly, I'm sick of looking at it."

"My bad, sir. You might try closing your eyes."

"Tempting." His gaze slid over to Ghost. "I'd like to see you both in my office."

Soap felt his shoulders tense. Too bad; he had just felt like the shower worked out all his knots. He could guess what this would be about.

Price didn't say another word until they were back in their positions from not that long ago, Price's office chair dragged in front of the brown leather couch. Once settled, he didn't beat around the bush.

"Lieutenant Harvey has been dismissed from service for misconduct."

"Good," Ghost growled.

"Really?" Soap asked.

Price squinted at Soap. "Would I pull your leg about this? Yes, really."

"I'm just surprised. I was never even questioned."

"There wasn't a need, since your captain witnessed the incident and had medical records and field reports to prove it."

Soap stared at Price, wide-eyed. Price had done a lot for Soap, but risking his own job by stretching the truth – *lying* – was *big*. "Oh," he breathed. "Price–"

"Keeping it off your shoulders was the least I could do after letting you deal with that alone for so long." Anger flickered behind Price's eyes. Soap felt lightheaded. "I'm only sorry I can't tell you he's been put away."

Soap felt his eyes watering. He blinked it back the best he could. "You can't put a bad boyfriend in jail, Price," he laughed weakly.

"That's not just a 'bad boyfriend,' son."

"Wasn't even a boyfriend," Ghost grumbled. Price shot him a look.

"I know," Soap sighed. "I know. Thank you. Seriously. I'm glad he's out of authority."

"I'm glad I could help." Price smiled and squeezed Soap's knee. "Now go cut that mullet of yours."

Said mullet stayed for another week and through another mission before Soap was ready to tackle it. It was a real problem beyond aesthetics now, since Soap was fighting it out of his eyes so often. He was determined to just chop the damn thing off until he was standing in his tiny excuse for an ensuite, staring at the offending hair in his mirror. He could barely comb through it without shaking in his damn boots from the memories of Harvey yanking him around by the roots. It was stupid, it made him feel weak, but Soap just couldn't take the jump.

He was saved by a knock at his door. Soap hurried to open it, grateful for the interruption.

It was Ghost. He frowned down at Soap. "I was going to ask you to spar, but you look like shit." His attention caught on the scissors Soap was still white-knuckling. Ghost's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he was moving, snatching the scissors from Soap's hand.

"Wh—" Soap gaped at him. "Hello to you, too, I guess."

Ghost was breathing just slightly faster than normal. Agitated. "You said you wouldn't hurt yourself."

"I wasn't...? Oh." Soap looked down at the scissors. "I was just going to cut this mop."

"Your hands are shaking."

Soap didn't have to look to confirm Ghost's accusation. He twisted his mouth to the side before answering. "I haven't been able to touch it since... then."

Ghost frowned harder. "Why?"

"He pulled it. It always hurt. And I'd pull it too." Soap avoided eye contact. "Just makes me feel sick. I'll get over it."

"Want me to do it?"

Soap looked back up at Ghost. He was still frowning, but looked nothing but genuine. "We can try," he said carefully. "If you're willing."

"Wouldn't have offered if I wasn't." Ghost stepped further into the room and closed the door behind himself. Soap took a deep breath and headed back to the little bathroom. "Tight squeeze," Ghost chuckled as he slid up behind him. Soap shivered. "I'm going to touch you now. You can stop me whenever. Tap out if you need to."

"It's just a haircut," Soap whispered.

"Johnny," Ghost said. Soap could feel it rumbling from Ghost's chest into his back where they were almost pressed together.

Ghost peeled his gloves off and reached around Soap to set them on the sink. "I'm going to touch you," he warned, and gave Soap another second before pressing his fingers into the back of Soap's neck, just to feel. Soap closed his eyes. Taking that as permission, Ghost threaded his fingers through the long strands falling down Soap's nape.

That was too much, too familiar, even if the hands were different. Soap's eyes shot back open. He frantically searched for Ghost's eyes in the mirror, needing something *not Harvey* to focus on. The eyeblack made his features blur behind Soap's panicked tears. Ghost's hands were gone as soon as he felt Soap tense.

"Just me," he soothed.

Soap nodded, then shook his head. "I know, I just—" He bit down the whimper that wanted to escape. "Sorry. I just can't see you."

Ghost hummed. "Would it help if I...?" Without finishing the thought, his hands went to the bottom of his mask. Soap watched wide-eyed as he started peeling it up. When he didn't stop where he normally rested

it above his nose, Soap startled.

“You don’t have to! I’m not trying to make you show your face, Ghost, I swear.”

Ghost smirked, and Soap could see it on his lips. He finished taking the mask off and tossed it on top of his gloves. “I want to, Johnny. Whatever helps. I don’t mind if it’s you.”

Soap didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded again. His hands gripped the edge of the sink to steady himself.

“I’m going to try again,” Ghost said. Again, his fingers threaded through Soap’s hair. This time, Soap kept his eyes locked onto Ghost’s reflection. “Doesn’t hurt?” Ghost asked as he ran his fingers through the rest of Soap’s hair.

“No,” Soap confirmed. He forced himself to focus on mapping the scars Soap had only witnessed once before.

Ghost grunted and got to work. He was as efficient as ever, trimming with surgical precision to the length Soap always used to cut his hair to. Soap felt the tension bleed from his body; he had been right. He had been being stupid. It was just a haircut. He let his eyes slip closed and allowed Ghost to redirect his head as he pleased, the gentle tugs never causing any pain.

With the mask off and Ghost so close behind him, Soap could feel his warm breath on his neck, his scalp, the back of his ears. He could feel the heat radiating off of Ghost’s chest through that tight cotton t-shirt. Soap sank into the rhythm of his breathing, the constant snipping of scissors, the strong fingers brushing loose hair from Soap’s skin before it could itch. Ghost finished all too quickly. He ruffled Soap’s freshly cut mohawk to get any loose strands still clinging on and blew on the back of Soap’s neck to finish the job. Soap let out a strangled sound a little too close to a moan, and both men froze.

Carefully, Soap opened his eyes to judge Ghost’s reaction to his slip. He wasn’t prepared to meet the dark gaze reflecting back at him. Soap felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“Done,” Ghost said, voice gravelly. Soap shuddered visibly.

“Thanks,” he replied.

Soap watched Ghost’s jaw flex. “Anytime.” He leaned in closer, and

Soap's heart rate ratcheted up before he realized Ghost was only reaching for his mask and gloves.

They didn't talk about it for a few weeks. Ghost, bafflingly enough, was the one to bring it up.

"You got a haircut."

Soap was pinned to the mat, Ghost's thighs around his neck threatening to choke him out. He tapped twice to yield, and Ghost let him go. "Aye," Soap rasped, "cut it myself last night."

"Hm." Ghost had the full mask on today, making it even more difficult to read his thoughts. Soap could still tell that noncommittal grunt was an ask for more information.

"You helped. Feels like – Uh." Soap checked the area surrounding them, embarrassed enough to confess this to Ghost, much less any other gym goers. Thankfully, it was all but deserted this late at night. "Like it canceled out, I guess. Can think of a friend instead of that dobber."

Ghost's legs were still around Soap's throat, and Soap could feel his thighs tense against him. Ghost waited another moment before detangling himself from Soap and hauling them both onto their feet.

"Anything else you need canceled out?" Ghost's voice was low, the way he rumbled into Soap's ear when they flirted over comms.

Soap could feel himself turning red. *Yes*, he wanted to say. *I can't look at myself naked without having a damn panic attack. I'm so pent up it hurts.*

"Nothing you'd want to help with," Soap said instead. He thought he might just be delusional, but Ghost almost looked disappointed.

Soap ran the pad of his fingertip along the rim of his empty glass. He was back at the shitty dive bar near base. He couldn't relax, even from his stool at the end of the bar with his back to the wall.

He had been thinking about his conversation with Ghost, about the

idea of *canceling it out*. Soap had come here with intentions to do so. He had a plan – Find a man, didn't matter who as long as Soap could take them in a brawl, and replace the feeling of Harvey's fingers with a nicer stranger. Now that he was here, though, Soap's stomach wouldn't stop turning.

Soap gave up for the night. He didn't want to force himself into anything, and he didn't want some poor sucker dealing with him panicking should things go wrong. It had been a dumb idea to come here. His therapist was going to roll her eyes at him for even trying. Heaving a sigh, Soap pushed his glass further into the bar and slid off his stool.

“MacTavish.”

Ice flooded Soap's veins. He pretended not to hear his name and started heading to the door, pace a little quicker than normal.

“*MacTavish.*”

Soap yanked the door open by its brass handle and fled into the street. He didn't get far. Heavy footsteps pounded up to him. Sturdy fingers yanked on the back of his jacket. Soap grit his teeth as he was forced to spin around and confront his old superior.

Harvey had a feral look in his eye. Soap clenched his jaw so hard it ached.

“Knew you'd come back to me, you fucking *rat*.” Harvey backhanded Soap across the cheek, but Soap refused to flinch. It just enraged him more; Harvey slammed his hand around Soap's throat and shoved him against a brick wall. “You're dead, MacTavish. I'm taking ‘*one for the road*’ and then you're fucking dead.”

The ice in Soap's veins was replaced with burning adrenaline. He didn't dignify Harvey's threat with a response. Instead, he slammed a knee into Harvey's groin and twisted his hand away from Soap's neck.

Soap was ready this time. He was well rested and uninjured. He had Ghost's advice running through his head from all their sparring, and Harvey was *nothing* compared to Ghost. He could take him down. He had to take him down.

He was shaking, though, and that was enough for Harvey to send him to the floor. His head smashed against the pavement, a feeling that was all too familiar to Soap. It had rained recently; Soap could feel the

wetness clinging between pavers on his cheek. Harvey crawled on top of Soap while his head was still ringing, got his hand back around his neck, and squeezed. "We can do this right here," Harvey taunted. "No one's going to help you." He ground his hips down against Soap's; Soap felt bile rise in his throat.

"Don't need any fucking help," Soap growled. "You're out of shape, old man." Ghost had held Soap in a position not too dissimilar from this one several weeks ago. Soap hadn't been able to concentrate on what Ghost was teaching him then, but Soap was grateful now that *something* had managed to sink in. He used both his legs to flip their positions and pin Harvey beneath him.

"Don't be coy. You liked this old man," Harvey laughed. Soap gripped his hair and shoved Harvey's face into the pavement, right where Soap's had been moments before. He hoped it scraped enough to bleed. "I've got videos of you *whimpering* for this old man. Saying you were *mine*."

"Shut up!" Soap lifted Harvey's head enough to slam it into the ground. The *crack* made his heart beat faster. "I'm not your fucking property. I'm the one who still has a title. *You should remember who you're speaking to*." Harvey squirmed, tried to get a grip on Soap's clothing, tried to get his legs under himself, but Soap held him firm. "You want a civilian trial too, you fucking bastard? I think they'll take a sergeant's side over a disgraced nobody."

Harvey laughed. It sounded manic. "Don't kid yourself, MacTavish. I know why you came here. You wanted me again. That's why you left. You only wanted me. You're *mine*."

"Shut *up*!" Soap slammed Harvey's head one more time; this time, he saw blood leaking out. Harvey didn't speak. His body went lax. Soap took his pulse, just to make sure he didn't murder the bastard, then got to his feet. A better man would have walked back into the bar and gotten someone to call an ambulance. Soap didn't feel like much of a man at all. He turned from Harvey and stalked away from the scene.

The chilly walk back to base didn't calm him down. Instead, Soap just felt more and more like he wanted to crawl out of his own flesh. He swore he could smell Harvey's cigarettes on his clothes, on his skin. The dampness on his cheek felt like Harvey's saliva. His throat throbbed where Harvey had pressed down on it. He could feel the echo of Harvey's hips between his legs. He wanted to cancel it out. Soap barely realized what that meant until he was pounding on

Ghost's door.

Ghost opened the door just an inch to assess his visitor. Soap could see the glint of a knife in his hand. When he saw it was only Soap, he opened the door all the way and flicked the knife closed. "It's one in the morning," he grunted, sleep in his voice. His balaclava wasn't on straight, like he pulled it on in a rush.

"Spar with me."

"What?"

"Spar with me. Please Ghost, you asked if I needed help with anything else, and I do. *Spar with me.*" Soap's whole body was shaking; he could hear it in his voice.

Ghost furrowed his brow. "Johnny. What happened?" He stepped back to give space for Soap to walk in. Soap hesitated. "Do you want to talk out here?"

Soap shook his head and accepted Ghost's offer. He had never been inside Ghost's room before. It was as devoid of personality as his own was. Soap shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and balled his fists.

"Your neck," Ghost breathed.

"Ran into Harvey."

"*What?*" Ghost drew himself even taller, somehow. "He's here? He touched you?"

Soap shook his head. "Not here. Went back to that bar. He followed me out and grabbed me." Ghost looked ready to hunt Harvey down. "I already knocked him out. He didn't do much. You taught me how, Ghost, you—" Soap felt his eyes burning, tried to choke down the tears. "Spar with me again, I don't want to feel him on me, I want to replace it with you. Please."

"Johnny—"

"*Please*, Ghost, I don't want to be his. I want to be *yours*. Want you to hit me and touch me and choke me so it's all *you*, not him." Soap couldn't stop babbling. He was desperate for Ghost to pin him to the floor, desperate for Ghost to grind down on him instead, for the phantom sensations to be *nice* and *warm*. Humiliatingly, he could feel hot tears spilling out from his waterline.

"Johnny." Ghost took two steps forward and pulled Soap into his chest. Soap couldn't stop the sob from escaping him. "No. You are not in the right mind to ask for that."

"Please," Soap sobbed into Ghost's shirt.

Ghost pushed Soap back just enough to look him in the eye. He looked down at Soap's neck, where Soap knew the bruises would have returned. He placed his own hand over them, and Soap cried harder. "That's all I can do for you right now," he said firmly. Soap pressed into the touch. "It's okay, Johnny. You got rid of him. I won't let him find you again."

Soap nodded, wanting to believe Ghost's promise. He pushed forward into Ghost's chest again. Ghost squeezed his arms around Soap's torso, and it helped. It was warm. It made Soap feel human again. He barely realized Ghost was walking them backwards until Ghost was seated on the edge of the bed and pulling Soap into his lap. Soap straddled his legs, Ghost's strong thighs between his own; not how he wanted, not pressing as harshly as Harvey's had, but it helped. Strong fingers rubbed at Soap's back more tenderly than Harvey's ever did.

"Thank you for coming to me," Ghost said when Soap quieted.

"Needed you," Soap rasped.

"You don't need anyone, Johnny. You're your own man."

Soap nodded into Ghost's shoulder. "Aye. Wanted you."

Ghost's answering rumble sounded like approval.

Soap woke up in Ghost's room the next morning. Ghost wasn't there, thank God. Soap's face burned with humiliation.

He wished he had drunk more before leaving the bar so he wouldn't have remembered himself going mental and begging Ghost to fuck him. So he wouldn't have remembered Ghost telling him no.

Groaning, Soap rolled out of Ghost's bed. His eye caught on a paper cup from the mess hall with a couple pills next to it. Soap flushed

harder; all that, and Ghost was still kind enough to leave him ibuprofen for his sore neck. Soap popped the pills with a sip of the lukewarm coffee as he slipped out of Ghost's room.

Soap didn't have time to dwell on it that day, kept busy with training a batch of recruits who weren't quite field ready. If he ran them a little harder than usual, nobody called him on it. The next day he wasn't quite as lucky. It was as close to a day off as Soap was ever going to receive, and the timing couldn't have been less appreciated.

He did what he normally did – fled to the gym. Maybe if he was lucky he could physically outrun his thoughts.

That is, of course, where Ghost found him. Soap had put his workout off until evening when he knew the gym would be empty, not really in the mood for conversation, but Ghost knew him too well it seemed. He felt a little pang of *déjà vu* as he started his cooldown with Ghost's eyes on him.

"Still wanna spar?" Ghost asked.

Soap tripped over his own feet. "You'd still do that?"

Ghost's brow furrowed. "'Course."

Soap stumbled off the treadmill. He should have kept cooling down, but he wasn't about to wait and tempt Ghost to change his mind. "Aye, you're on," Soap said with a cocky grin that didn't meet his eyes.

Soap won the first round. He had a hunch Ghost had handed it to him; there had been a plenty big enough opening for Ghost to seize when Soap first got them to the ground. Ghost grunted with approval nonetheless, so Soap didn't question it too much. Ghost stopped taking it easy on him after that, though, and slippery as Soap was, it wasn't long before he swiped Soap's legs out from under him and pinned him to the mat with a forearm braced against his neck.

"Nice one, LT," Soap wheezed.

"Alright, Johnny?"

"Peachy." Soap accepted the hand Ghost offered to help him back to his feet. "One more."

One more turned into several. Soap had a dopey grin on his face by

the end of it, new bruises littering his blissfully tired body. He hummed happily as Ghost herded him into the showers, even if Ghost complained about how Soap “reeked” as he did so.

Ghost took his shower stall in the corner like always, but this time he didn’t face the wall. There was nobody around but Soap to see. The display of trust made something flutter in Soap’s chest; he did his best to respect it by not staring. Even when Ghost finished his shower and waited for Soap to do the same, he kept the mask off.

“Thanks, Ghost,” Soap said when Ghost tossed a towel at him. “Was kind of worried I’d have to transfer teams after all.”

Ghost’s eyebrows shot up. Soap was distantly pleased he could see it happening without even eyeblack covering the expression. “Why would you?”

Soap waved a hand to try and distract from the pink in his cheeks. “Y’know, the whole asking you to slap me around in bed thing. Bit gross, eh?”

He watched as red climbed up Ghost’s neck for once. Maybe it had in the past and Soap was just never able to see it. “It’s a fine idea,” Ghost rumbled, “but not when you’re in a state like that. ‘M not gonna take advantage of that.”

Soap gaped. *A fine idea.*

“I’m...*glad*, I guess, that you feel safe enough with me to...” Ghost looked like he wanted nothing more than to crawl back under the safety of a mask, but he didn’t do anything more than twist the one in his hands. “I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret, and I don’t want to be another lieutenant pushing you around.”

“Oh,” Soap breathed. “I wouldn’t do that either, Ghost, not just because of your rank. That’s not what...” He swallowed and looked down at his feet. They were still bare; he still had only a towel clutched around his waist. It made him flush even deeper. “As my friend. As *Simon*. I trust you.” Soap squeezed the ends of the towel where they were bunched in his fist. “Want you,” he whispered to his own feet.

“Johnny,” Ghost growled. His feet came into Soap’s field of view as he stepped closer. “I want – As Simon, I want–” His breath stuttered. “But I’m not just Simon, I *am* your lieutenant, and I couldn’t live with myself if I pressured you into anything.”

Soap met his eyes. They almost looked wrong on Ghost's face – too soft, too warm to be surrounded by such vicious scar tissue. Soap couldn't look at anything else. "You wouldn't. You're not that type of man."

"Maybe, maybe not. I've done bad things, Johnny."

"We all do bad things, Simon. But not that."

"No," Ghost agreed, "not that."

Soap's mouth twitched with the urge to bite his lip until it cracked open under his teeth. If either of them were smart, they should walk away and pretend the conversation never happened.

"Could end both of our careers," Soap said, not sure who he was trying to convince.

"Could end out there any day anyway," Ghost murmured. He dropped Soap's gaze to look down at his neck. He lifted his hand up to settle it over the fading bruises again. Soap gasped, and knew Ghost could feel it under his palm.

"Price will kill us."

"He'll kill me," Ghost corrected. "He can try."

Soap cracked a smile at that. Ghost leaned in and pressed his own lips to it. They were softer than Soap expected; he supposed they didn't get exposed to the elements the way Soap's did.

Ghost pulled away too quickly for Soap's liking. "Simon," he whined, not caring how needy he sounded.

Ghost closed his eyes, like he needed to focus before replying. "We shouldn't... Listen, Johnny." He met Soap's gaze again, dead serious. "Cool off. Think about it. That shit with Harvey just got brought back up. I trust you to know what you're doing, but cool off first." His hand dropped to Soap's chest. "I can't do things by halves."

Soap's head spun. "What are you saying?" He watched as color rose to Ghost's cheeks again.

"You're not *that dense*, Johnny. Now put some damn clothes on." With that, Ghost shoved his balaclava back onto his head and stalked away.

Gaz was halfway through his third drink and a game of solitaire on Soap's floor when he brought it up.

"So, you and Ghost an item?"

Soap choked on his scotch. It burned in his nostrils. "Excuse me?" He gasped. *Gaz heard us*, he thought, panicked.

Gaz only leaned on one elbow and smirked. "I see you together an awful lot. Ghost doesn't believe in quality time with anyone else, y'know."

"You spend more time with me than he does, Gaz," Soap said, even if he wasn't sure how true the statement was. "We an item too?"

Gaz grinned harder. "I don't look at you with puppy-dog eyes like that, so I don't think so."

"*Puppy dog* – Ghost would murder you if he heard you say that."

"I'd like to see him try." Gaz's smile softened. "Really though, you can't tell me there's nothing going on there."

Soap felt heat crawling up his neck. "Well, that's what I'm telling you."

"So he's making you keep it a secret." Gaz's smile dropped completely, face stony in a way Soap had only ever seen on the field. "I'm not overlooking things a second time, Soap."

Soap rushed to reassure him. "Swear up and down, Gaz, nothing like that." Gaz only narrowed his eyes at the hoodie pulled tight around Soap's neck hiding Harvey's fading bruises. "Swear! He turned me down, even."

At that, Gaz sat straight up. "He *what*?"

"Ah, Christ," Soap moaned. "You breathe a word of this to anyone and you're toast. I, uh, *propositioned* him – *twice* – and he told me to 'cool off' first."

"Cool off from what?"

“From – Jesus, Gaz! I shouldn’t be telling you any of this shit. Don’t tell Price, but I ran into Harvey again a few days ago.”

“Don’t tell Price? You mad?” Gaz threw one of his cards at Soap’s face, which Soap didn’t quite dodge on time. It landed harmlessly in his lap.

“I took him down! Hopefully scared him off for good. The old man already did too much, he doesn’t need to worry his head about it. Don’t want him thinking I’m compromised, either.”

Gaz rolled his eyes, but Soap thought he looked more settled. “You’re daft, MacTavish.” Soap threw the card back at Gaz, but Gaz caught it with deft fingers before it could hit his chest. He returned it to its place in the spread. “I like him, but you better tell me if Ghost does anything shady.”

“Promise, Gaz. I learn from my mistakes.”

Gaz nodded, took a sip of his drink, and settled back into his game of solitaire.

For all Ghost’s talk about cooling off, he didn’t make it easy for Soap to do so. He was back to being Soap’s shadow. His dark stare didn’t irritate Soap the way it used to; instead, it made heat churn in his gut every time he caught Ghost lurking nearby.

Ghost usually opted to take a tray of food and vanish with it back to his room, much like his namesake, but he was regularly joining Soap and the rest of the 141 now. He always took the seat across from Soap, studying him, smirking whenever Soap squirmed. He barely spoke, worked through his meal, and left as soon as he was finished. It was still enough to make Soap antsy.

He must have found whatever he was searching for with all that staring, because when Soap finally broke ten days later and showed up at his door again, Ghost only grabbed him by the arm and tugged him inside.

“What did you decide?” Ghost asked, already leaning into Soap’s space. He knew what the answer would be.

“I want whatever you’ll give me.”

Soap watched Ghost’s pupils dilate. Instead of replying, Ghost ripped his balaclava off and pressed his lips against Soap’s. They were just as soft as Soap remembered. This time, though, Ghost had no qualms about prying Soap open and licking into his mouth, swallowing the pleased little groan Soap let out.

Ghost backed off too soon again, lips shiny with Soap’s spit. “We stop when you say, Johnny. And we stop when I say.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not ‘sir.’”

Heat pooled in Soap’s gut. “Simon,” he whispered.

“That’s right. Good boy, Johnny.” Ghost finally put a hand on Soap, palm resting on Soap’s hip, thumb dipping under his shirt to rub circles. “I don’t like my hands restrained behind my back. Makes me feel like I’m tied to a chair. If you do anything else I don’t like, I’ll tell you.” He watched Soap carefully, making sure he was taking this seriously. “What don’t you want me to do? S’okay if you don’t know everything yet.”

Soap shivered and leaned into the point of contact with Ghost. “Don’t pull my hair. Not yet. Used to love it, but – Well, doesn’t matter.”

He didn’t say anything else, but Ghost saw through him. “What else? Everything, Johnny.” His hand stayed steady on Soap’s hip. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t, but... But stay in front of me, maybe. And keep the lights on, if it’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay.”

“Don’t yell at me, but you can manhandle and bruise me if you want. I want you to. I want...” Soap tried to look away, but when Ghost squeezed his side, he made eye contact again. “I want to feel like I’m yours.”

“You *are* mine, Johnny. And I’m yours, if you’ll have me.”

“Please, Ghost – *Simon*,” Soap whined. Ghost had pity and dragged him towards the bed. Soap couldn’t tear his eyes away as Ghost peeled

away that sinfully tight t-shirt. Ghost quirked a brow at Soap, and only then did Soap rush to do the same.

Ghost pulled himself onto the bed, back against the headboard. Soap followed him down to straddle his lap. The mattress was ever so slightly softer under Soap's knees than his own would have been – perks of being a commissioned officer, he supposed. Ghost trailed his hands up Soap's sides and pulled him in closer.

"You're so big," Soap groaned against Ghost's lips, spreading his fingers against Ghost's chest. "Drives me crazy."

"Yeah? Usually just scares people off."

Soap grinned. "Their loss." He dipped his head to suck a mark under Ghost's jaw, one that only he would ever see. It sent a possessive thrill down his spine. Ghost didn't seem displeased either; his hips twitched up against Soap's.

Soap rolled his hips just to tease. Ghost grabbed them with both his hands and made him repeat the motion. "What do you want?" he asked, so low and gravelly Soap could barely make it out.

"Want you inside me," Soap said against Ghost's skin. Ghost groaned in response, fingers tightening on Soap's hips.

"Yes, Johnny." Soap was no small man himself, but Ghost made rolling him to the side and onto his back look easy. Soap laughed, delighted, and Ghost smirked back. He reached under his pillow and pulled out a bottle of lube.

"You keep that close," Soap snickered.

"I'm an efficient man." Ghost set the bottle on Soap's chest, and Soap pretended being treated like a table didn't do something for him. He let Ghost make quick work of his belt and shimmied to help Ghost slide his pants down and off his legs. Ghost took a little more time removing Soap's briefs, eyes devouring every centimeter of skin as it was revealed. He licked his lips.

"Don't even think about it, I won't last," Soap whined. Ghost huffed as if it was some great loss. As if in revenge, Ghost hoisted one of Soap's legs up and pressed it up towards Soap's chest.

"Hold that for me," Ghost demanded. Soap flushed beet red but obeyed.

Ghost shoved a pillow under Soap's hips before grabbing the bottle of lube back off of Soap's chest. He slicked his fingers, giving it a second to warm up before circling Soap's entrance. Soap couldn't contain a whimper at the touch. "Simon," he begged, and Ghost pressed inside.

It had been a while. It had been since Harvey. Soap tensed at the thought, and Ghost immediately stilled. "Eyes on me," Ghost said. "This okay?"

Soap tore his gaze from Ghost's fingers to his face. His pale skin was flushed underneath all his scars, lips still red and kiss-bitten, but his warm eyes were nothing but serious. Soap nodded. "Keep going."

Ghost pressed a kiss to the leg Soap was holding. "Good boy," he praised, and Soap's breath stuttered. Ghost pressed another finger inside. "You like that? Being a good boy for me?"

"Fuck, yes, Simon." Soap's free hand clutched at the sheets beneath him. Ghost crooked his fingers once, twice, before Soap's back curled off the mattress. Ghost used the opportunity to slide in a third. "Please," Soap begged, not sure for what.

"You look good like this," Ghost growled. He worked his fingers against Soap's inner walls until Soap was seeing stars, insistently pressing against his prostate. "Spread out for me in my bed. Should've had you here years ago."

Soap threw his head back and whined. "Could've," he agreed.

"Fuck, Johnny." Ghost spread his fingers out. Soap didn't have the capacity to be embarrassed about the noise he made in response.

"Come on, come on!" Soap pressed his free heel into Ghost's lower back. "Get on with it!"

"Impatient."

"You're the one who's been giving me fuckin' bedroom eyes all week."

"I was not giving you bedroom eyes," Ghost grumbled, but he pulled his fingers out and stood up to remove the rest of his clothing anyway. He rifled around in his bedside table for a condom before returning to his place between Soap's legs. Soap liked seeing him there. He looked like he belonged.

Soap watched eagerly as Ghost rolled the condom onto himself, giving

it a couple strokes to spread the remaining lube around. Ghost replaced Soap's hand on his thigh with his own, pressing it further into Soap's chest, and pushed into Soap's body. Soap kept his eyes on Ghost, just like he had asked earlier, and moaned when Ghost bottomed out.

"So good for me, Johnny." Ghost finally let Soap's leg fall back down. Soap wrapped them both around Ghost's torso to pull him in as close as he could. "Feels incredible."

"Yeah," Soap gasped. "Big everywhere, huh?"

Ghost cocked a grin. "That usually scares people off too." He rolled his hips, and Soap had to reach up and claw at Ghost's back to ground himself.

"Their fucking loss," he repeated breathlessly. "More, come on."

Ghost obeyed. He dragged himself out of Soap slowly, letting him feel every inch, and eased back in at the same torturous pace. Soap did his best to grind up against him, to press his heels against Ghost's back to drive him in faster, but Ghost wouldn't be swayed. He waited until he was damn good and ready before picking up the pace, hands wandering down Soap's body before settling around his hips.

Ghost was strong, firm, but gentle all at the same time. He rolled his hips, shifted them both, until he found that same spot his fingers had toyed with earlier. Soap sobbed out a moan. Ghost fucked into him with military precision, hitting his target without fail now that he had it in his sight.

Soap wanted to be embarrassed about how quickly he was approaching orgasm, but he couldn't quite find it in himself to care about anything other than chasing his own pleasure. He twitched his hips up against Ghost, still trying to get more out of him, but Ghost held him firm. Held him *tight*. Right above the crease of his thighs, thumbs digging into his hip bones where... *Fuck*. Soap scratched lines down Ghost's back when he realized just what Ghost was doing.

"Close, Simon, 'm so close," he sobbed. "Please, please, I just need—" Soap's words got lost in a cry when Ghost's hand wrapped around his length. Soap leaned forward and sank his teeth into Ghost's shoulder. He tried to curse even with Ghost's skin and muscle between his teeth.

"Come for me," Ghost grunted. He was moving faster now, hand stroking Soap at the same pace. "I wanna feel you."

Soap tried to form words, but all he could do was muffle a shout into Ghost's shoulder. His entire body trembled as he finally, *finally* came. He felt himself tighten around Ghost, felt Ghost's hips stutter as he worked him through the orgasm.

"*Good fuckin' boy, Johnny.*" Ghost's hands squeezed tighter around Soap's hips. Soap leaned back just enough to watch Ghost's face as he came, his eyes squeezing shut, jaw dropping open. His hips slowed but kept rolling against Soap until they were both oversensitive, and only then did he pull away.

Soap collapsed. His chest was heaving, trying to catch his breath. He watched with lidded eyes as Ghost trailed his hand through the mess Soap had made on his own stomach. His fingers lifted to Soap's lips, and Soap obediently licked them clean.

"Jesus," Ghost sighed. "Gonna kill me."

Soap's lips pulled into a lazy grin. "What a way to go, eh LT?"

Ghost tied off the condom and threw it towards his wastebasket. He made the shot, of course, accuracy not about to fail him now. Satisfied, he sank back down on top of Soap, wrapped his arms around his torso, and rolled them both onto their sides. For a minute, they both simply caught their breath and enjoyed the heat shared between them.

"Good?" Ghost eventually asked.

Soap gently smacked Ghost's bicep. "Fishing for compliments? How unbecoming."

Ghost rolled his eyes. "Not what I meant."

"I know," Soap chuckled. "All good, Simon." He glanced down to where bruises were already forming on his hips. "*Real* good."

Ghost's smile was small but genuine. "Good." He gave Soap a little squeeze before rolling off the bed and lumbering to his sink. Soap closed his eyes and listened to the faucet running, listened to it squeak back off, to the footsteps padding back towards the bed. Ghost wiped a warm, damp cloth along Soap's skin to clean him up, and Soap hummed contentedly. When he was done, Ghost tossed the rag onto their pile of clothing and climbed back into bed. Soap opened his eyes when he felt Ghost pulling sheets on top of them both.

“You want me to stay?”

Ghost looked at Soap like he was stupid. Maybe he was. “Yes, Johnny.”

“Oh.” Soap flushed. “Cool. Thanks.”

“Johnny,” Ghost grunted. “If it wasn’t clear, I have fucking feelings for you.”

Soap flushed harder, but he couldn’t help the pleased grin that pulled at his lips. “I – Me too, Simon.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Ghost rolled his eyes again, but he huffed out a little chuckle that betrayed his good mood. “I’m gonna hit the light, that okay?”

“Aye. Thank you.” Soap burrowed into Ghost’s chest. He could hear Ghost’s heartbeat. “You’re so warm,” he mumbled.

Ghost wrapped his arms around Soap again. “You are too, Johnny.” Soap felt the words more than he heard them, rumbling from Ghost’s chest against Soap’s head. It was all Soap needed to drift off to dreamless sleep.

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